



**National Park Service
Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program**

**El Paso Youth Conference
October 20, 2007
El Paso, TX**

Follow-up Report



Participants at El Paso Youth Workshop

Photo courtesy of Charles Tracy

National Park Service

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth, non-profit organizations that focus on youth, Groundwork Trusts and Green Teams, NPS staff and other state and federal agencies gathered at Chamizal National Memorial in El Paso, TX on October 20, 2007 to share each others' "best practices" for recruiting, engaging, retaining and encouraging youth to get involved and stay involved in conservation and outdoor recreation as a lifestyle. The National Park Service (NPS) and the NPS Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program (NPS-RTCA) want to explore how to be more relevant with our programs, projects, and services and how to promote potential career paths for youth.

The workshop was one of three events hosted by NPS-RTCA to bring together youth and partners for discussions about issues regarding youth involvement in conservation and outdoor recreation. Not surprisingly, the issues are complicated, subtle and challenging. The good news is that they can be addressed effectively through focused programming, targeted funding, cooperative partnerships and adapting to the needs of youth – which sometimes change as popular trends come and go. NPS-RTCA is taking a lead role to gather and analyze information, to formulate guidance and recommendations, and practice effective youth involvement in program projects around the country.

Using the “world café” small group method, over seventy participants, nearly twenty of whom were youth, responded to the question “What do you love most about the conservation/ outdoor recreation programs in which you are involved?” Workshop planners wanted to understand how close the match is between what youth say they like and what program coordinators are offering. Next question posed – “What are the long term goals or long term impacts you hope to have with youth through your program?” Again, youth were asked a similar question for comparison. The final question to all participants of the world café was “What are some good ways to recruit youth to outdoor recreation and conservation programs?”

After lunch the participating youth organizations offered brief presentations describing their most effective methods for working with youth. Then, getting down to specifics, attendees were asked “What are important practices of a successful youth conservation or outdoor recreation program?” And “How can NPS work effectively with your organization?”

Results of all this discussion are clear. Youth respond to outdoor recreation experiences the same way we do – they have fun, they learn and they adopt stewardship values and visions. They develop a sense of empowerment when working to make improvements to their environment or neighborhood and they want to gain knowledge and skills through that work that are transferable and applicable to future employments. Youth want to learn more about conservation, stewardship and NPS through the “latest” in communication technology and trends, that is how to best reach them. Finally, partnerships with youth-focused organizations are critical to increase awareness of NPS among youth. Those organizations need measureable outcomes, adequate resources and stable funding to provide training and incentives for participation.

FULL REPORT

Values and Satisfaction Regarding Youth and Conservation/Outdoor Recreation Programs

“What do you love most...”

To break the ice, workshop participants were asked “*What do you love most about the conservation/outdoor recreation program(s) you are involved in now or in the past?*” Responses from both youth and program managers fell into three over-arching concepts:

- **Skill Development**: Public speaking, leadership, job skills for career development, problem solving and self-esteem building, learning more about history and the environment by working in the NPS parks and other projects, how to work with others on a team, working with tools and electronics to get the job done.
- **Advocacy/Stewardship**: Connecting to the earth and nature, increase awareness and avenues for effective stewardship, satisfaction from a completed project, developing appreciation for serene time in nature, discovering new recreational opportunities.
- **Partnerships**: Opportunity to meet different types of people, working in teams, collaboration among related organizations and agencies, intergenerational programs, volunteering.

Suggested Future Directions

As NPS and NPS-RTCA continue to involve more youth in conservation and outdoor recreation, programs and projects we need to ensure the knowledge and skills gained are transferable and applicable to future employment. Since many national and community organizations exist to engage youth in conservation and outdoor recreation programs, NPS and NPS-RTCA can seek out and cultivate working relationships for project-specific partnerships within park units and other community conservation efforts.



Youth-lead Work Session

Photo courtesy of Charles Tracy

“What are the long term goals...”

In an effort to learn about long term goals and expectations, participants were asked to respond to “*what are the long term goals of your program or the long term benefits youth desire from your program or participation?*” Both program managers and youth responded in separate groups.

The managers’ goals can be generalized into four concepts:

- Increase Awareness: increase number of “first time in nature” experiences, more exposure to NPS and state parks including trail work within NPS units, improvements in local community from project work, provide non-traditional recreation opportunities, establish stewardship and advocacy values.
- Measureable Outcomes: Increase diversity of visitation/volunteers in NPS workforce, development of inner city open space network, establish relationship between school districts and NPS units as a gateway that allows students to learn about opportunities.
- Skill Building/Career Opportunity: Exposure to work ethics, transferable skills into the workplace.
- Stable/Reliable Funding: Establish long term funding for year-round programming, financial sustainability.

Youth goals are:

- Community Improvement: beautification of the city, improving neighborhoods and neighbor relations, making the city a safer place for youth, developing healthy alternatives and options.
- Job Skills: developing work ethics, work experience, being exposed to real work dilemmas, developing peer training techniques.

Long term benefits identified were:

- Youth become more aware of surroundings and will become advocates/stewards for the land
- Develop perseverance in tough situations
- Participation in community efforts
- Increased visitation to National Parks
- Development of healthier habits
- Effective use of brownfields and greenspace
- Increased non-motorized transportation
- Community cohesion creating sustainable communities
- Provide better service to youth-serving organizations, including providing resources in order to reduce administrative costs, and help with transportation

SUGGESTED FUTURE DIRECTIONS

NPS units can help youth organizations achieve their goals by identifying in-park projects that involve youth in a meaningful way, such as trail work and other park management work details, and find ways to allocate funding for youth involvement projects. NPS-RTCA can assist with the stated goals by identifying opportunities to link community projects that involve youth to NPS units, either for partnership or for a visitor experience. In the historic tradition of CCC work, any youth-based project within an NPS unit should be signed to acknowledge the stewardship contributions made by youth.

“What are important practices...?”

Best practices, for any project or program, are an important factor for success. Program managers were asked, “*What are some best practices of a successful youth conservation or outdoor recreation program?*” Youth were asked, “*What are good ways to recruit youth to outdoor recreation/conservation programs?*” Following are their respective responses. The managers’ responses emerged as four different general concepts:

- Adequate Resources: Funding, tools, staff, transportation, project planning, briefings at job site, job hazard analysis, measurable goals, effective marketing and outreach.
- Training: For staff and for youth, diversity in staff as well as youth recruited, job skills and potential career opportunities, variety of activities, stewardship skills.
- Incentives: Combination of incentives or benefits that include fun / interesting projects, potential scholarships, educational credit, interactive role in planning, and cash payment.
- Partnership: Effective partnerships with sponsoring agencies for funding, mentor relationships for youth, committed community liaisons from agencies, committed participants and passionate leaders.

Youth responses were very similar when asked about recruiting:

- Outreach: Use various marketing mediums such as television, radio and podcasts, connect electronically with students using websites i.e. myspace.com-“my outdoorspace” and web rangers, go to or sponsor youth fairs, develop mentoring relationships.
- Incentives: Offer internships with high schools and colleges, provide stipends and employment opportunities, offer academic credit, provide transportation, supply prizes, trips, food.
- Programs: Develop summer environmental programs, develop partnerships with other youth-focused organizations and schools for community service component.

SUGGESTED FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Effective youth involvement in NPS units and within NPS-RTCA projects will be enhanced by solid planning, broader outreach technology and diversity, strong youth organization partnerships, training components that teach to the task as well as the context of how the learned skills can lead to more opportunity, and incentives or rewards to youth who participate and provide a service.



World Café Work Session

Photo courtesy of George McDonald

“Working with NPS...?”

Finally, participants were asked *“What do you need for effective youth work with NPS?”* The answers were straight forward:

- Provide technical training
- Effective community outreach and education
- Involvement of youth corps at all levels
- Provide stipends for youth workers
- Communications makeover to streamline communications between agencies and make it easier to find things on the website
- Increased funding opportunities
- Increased political support
- Increased willingness to work with outside/community groups
- Development of transferable employment skills

SUGGESTED FUTURE DIRECTIONS

NPS and RTCA are seen by our youth organization partners as resource providers (projects, funding), and a source for information and skill training. If this is a desired role for NPS and RTCA, it is imperative to clearly define and develop a programmatic and funding strategy for linked youth involvement efforts in National Park units and local communities including outreach designed to attract, engage, retain and encourage both youth and youth organizations to be involved and stay involved in conservation, outdoor recreation and stewardship. It will be an investment in the NPS future and demonstrate a responsiveness to needs facing our youth, our communities and our country.



Is this a future NPS Director?

Photo courtesy of George McDonald